

THE TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART
MUSEUM NEWS

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THE TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART

Founded by Edward Drummond Libbey

Museum News

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(cover) George W. Stevens, Medallion by T. Spicer Simpson, 1918

George W. Stevens

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FIRST DIRECTOR, THE TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART



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about 1915

George W. Stevens

George W. Stevens came to Toledo for a day and stayed for a life-time. Toledo was better for it, and the course of art museum development was turned in a new direction after he had set his mind to the problem of making one of them useful to all the people.

His career began only after he had been in Toledo for thirteen years, had reached the age of thirty-seven and had become Director of The Toledo Museum of Art. When he

assumed this post, he had been successively, and successfully, newspaper reporter, columnist, contributor to popular magazines, one of the early advertising writers, promotion and booking manager for three theaters and the summer play-houses conducted by street railway companies in fourteen cities. He had also travelled extensively abroad, had conducted tours, had published two volumes of verse, and had shown his oils and watercolors in frequent exhibitions.

Perhaps he could have been considered a rolling stone; certainly he had gathered no moss; rather he had given a fine polish to those native qualities and abilities which made it possible for him to work what had been called "a miracle in a manufacturing city."

Captain and Commissary, 16th Regiment, O.N.G., about 1893



Once he had accepted the responsibility for developing a museum for Toledo, his life was dedicated to it. He had found a worthy objective, an ideal and a purpose to which he could devote his life and all his energies. Offers of four and five times his meager salary from well-endowed and supported museums were rejected, while Toledo's bank account was frequently overdrawn, his own salary unpaid, and financial stability still a mirage.

Despite the many handicaps, he was able by his vision, humanity, eloquence, his physical presence and his personality, to build an institution and a memory which survives forty years after his death.

George Stevens was one of the most loved and best remembered men in Toledo. Nor was his esteem confined to Toledo. Writing in the Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago just after his death, Robert Harshe, its Director said, "In the entire American museum field there was no more vivid personality, none more unselfish, none better loved. He made the beginnings of the institution which he served; almost literally he built it brick on brick. For a long period he directed its affairs from his bedside. He was an heroic figure who had no conception of his own greatness."

Eleven years after his death, *Fortune* researchers came to Toledo to prepare an article on the Art Museum. In every interview that they had with people in all walks of life, the name Stevens arose; and when the article appeared, it bore the title "The Pied Piper of Toledo," and, after saying "The museum (in America) is now a community enterprise, a part of the educational system, for both adults and children. . . . Of this great democratic movement, the end of which no man can at present foresee, the Toledo Museum stands out as the most striking and most representative example." It continued: "George Stevens was the creator of the Toledo Museum, but not its originator. Toledo was the product of two men whose minds fitted perfectly; and the other was Edward Drummond Libbey."

The idea of a Museum of Art for Toledo was incubated, if not hatched, in the Tile Club—an organization of young men whose enthusiasm for the arts had not been dulled by the necessity of sustaining life by more prosaic pursuits. George Stevens was a founding member of this group. They hoped for a place where they could see exhibitions such as were taking place in New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and perhaps have a collection of a few masterpieces—even some works of the Old Masters—which they could study, and where they might be able to show their own works from time



George W. Stevens: His early pictures show the actor.

to time. George W. Stevens was delegated to present the idea to Edward Drummond Libbey. Aided by the Libbey Glass Company pavilion on the Midway at the Chicago Exposition, by a reorganization of the plant production, and a vigorous sales campaign, Mr. Libbey and the Company had come out of their financial difficulties with prime instead of doubtful credit, a national stature and bright prospects for the future.

Moreover, Edward Drummond Libbey had a great and abiding faith in education. He had attended Boston University, but the financial difficulties of the New England Glass Company and the death of his father had prevented him from

going as far as he had hoped. In Toledo he had married Florence Scott, whose grandfather Jessup was the founder of The University of Toledo, and who was a friend, comforter and modest financial supporter of Horace Mann, then struggling manfully but unsuccessfully to develop Antioch College.

Mr. and Mrs. Libbey were acquainted with the museums in Chicago, New York and Boston, and had visited galleries abroad. They had bought some pictures. They sensed the advantages which might accrue to an industrial community, grasped the educational possibilities, and envisioned a close relationship for a museum and the public schools.

The Toledo Museum of Art was incorporated, Mr. Libbey its President, members enlisted, quarters rented, a secretary employed, exhibitions held. But enthusiasm vanished, interest flagged, membership dues went unpaid. The secretary resigned and the Trustees were ready to give up. But not Mr. Libbey. He had weathered far more serious storms in the glass business. He asked George Stevens to take over the project and make it a success. Thus began an association of increasing closeness which lasted until their deaths just a year apart.

A museum foundering on the shoals of disinterest and the rocks of poverty, that had but seven visitors in the month before he and his wife Nina (who deserves a separate story of her contribution) took over its direction, had physical assets of \$293, one painting, and a mummified Egyptian cat, needed a dramatic rescue and an inspiring prospect.

He started with a statement at the opening of his first exhibition (on November 7, 1903) saying, in part, "The first thing that I want to do is to remove from the minds of the people that The Toledo Museum of Art is an ultra-conservative association, or an expensive luxury. It is neither one nor the other. It has something to give that all the people want and we want them all with us." This proclamation of democracy for institutions that had long been highly class-conscious he reiterated again and again.

Writing of the Toledo Museum in 1912, soon after the dedication of the new building, he said "It is unique — it is a museum of the people, hundreds pay annual dues, thousands cheerfully pay admission that other tens of thousands who perhaps are not able to pay, may receive its benefits free of cost."

Again, in 1920 he said, "This institution knows neither color, creed, class, nor nationality. Every advantage we have to offer is within easy reach of the humblest citizen and the poorest child, and all this is made possible by your help and

by the help of those who feel that ten dollars a year is a small contribution compared with the returns to the members, to the citizens and to the 70,000 children who annually flock to the Museum."

His ideal of a museum for all the people has now become firmly woven into the fabric of the Toledo Museum. Among the last things that he wrote was the inscription in the forecourt of the Museum: "For the benefit of all those who seek self improvement." Throughout his museum life, his greatest interest was in people — especially in those who sought self-improvement — most especially in those who sought it through art.

Within the first month of his directorship, he announced that children would be welcomed even without adults, started free drawing classes for children as well as adults, offered to talk on the exhibitions to any school classes brought in by their teachers, and to talk on art or the Art Museum any time, anywhere — and the public response was most encouraging.

George Stevens' bold new concept of what a museum of art could and should be was not soon shared by all his colleagues. It was even after some years of demonstration — practice, not preaching — and conversion of many, that some still saw little virtue in art instruction for all, children's classes, welcome to all, including unaccompanied children. Henry Kent had early admired his work, and had hoped to see it emulated in the great Metropolitan, of which he was secretary, a feat not accomplished until Francis Taylor became its director. Robert W. de Forest was President of the Metropolitan, and of the American Federation of Arts. Mr. Kent took advantage of the meeting of the latter in Detroit to show him the work of the museums in Cleveland and Toledo as well. In Toledo, his response to all that he saw, to Mr. Kent's enthusiasm, to Mr. Stevens' magnetic personality was "Mr. Stevens, don't you think you are carrying this thing (children's activities) too far?"

The next day Mr. Kent wrote Mr. Stevens from Cleveland: "They gave us a dinner here last night. Mr. de Forest, in a speech which he made, had taken in what I wanted him to learn from you, that money alone does not make a museum; he spoke to the text that humanity comes first; and that he got from you, just as we all do.

"They are doing things here, education-wise, and we in New York are doing good work in bringing our collections together, but you are doing the best work of all because you are human. I guess I may have told you this before — and

you know it anyway — but it doesn't do any harm to register my opinion again, does it?"

From the beginning, George Stevens had seen far beyond the confines of an old home, remodelled though it had been to serve as a museum. Within five years he and Mrs. Stevens had pushed it to the limit of its possibilities, and a bold new project that would fire the imagination of the community to the point of increased interest and support, and provide essential facilities for further growth, was again essential.

The most logical new project was a new building. It must be efficient, imposing, inviting, monumental without being massive, friendly and not forbidding. It must have dignity, simplicity, and harmony of proportion without and within. The architecture of the galleries must not compete with the exhibits they were to house.

The Toledo Museum of Art, Madison at 13th Street, before 1910.



On a yellow pad he sketched the facade — a broad building with classic colonnade across the center, flanked by blank walls, surmounted by a low entablature, approached by easy steps the full width of the colonnade. On another sheet he drew the plan of the main floor, galleries, library and offices to either side of an entrance court, a small auditorium back of it — the first museum in the world designed and planned by its director, based upon study of community needs and possibilities, definite plans for fulfilling and developing them, and five years of experience in operating the new and exciting kind of a museum of art with its manifold activities which the Libbeys and the Stevens had conceived. The Libbeys' enthusiasm resulted in a substantial contribution, to be matched by public subscription.

The Toledo Museum of Art was built as he had designed it — but not without great difficulties. The first of these — money raising — was the one that tormented him from the day he took over the job almost until the end of his life. Money was not easy to come by in the aftermath of the 1907 panic, but the Stevens met the Libbeys' challenge — which so pleased them that they more than doubled their own contribution.

Next, Mr. Stevens was stricken by arthritis, was in hospitals or physically incapacitated for long periods, and never without pain, at times approaching the unendurable. He was able to preserve through the formalizing of the plans and the erection of the structure the beauty, utility and the spirit of his design, but at the cost of precious time and strength. The culmination, the opening of a fine museum building, fully paid for, with a superb Inaugural Exhibition, was the most impressive event that to this day has occurred in Toledo.

Of the building, the *New York Times* wrote (under a January 18, 1912, date-line), "Toledo's new Museum of Art, acknowledged to be one of the finest buildings in the world, was dedicated today." *Fortune* could say twenty-five years later, when it had been enlarged to ten times the size of the first unit, "There is nothing forbidding about the chastity of its marble walls and the dignity of the Ionic facade. It doesn't oppress you, as do so many museums, with a sense of mass. And when you go inside, you will be struck immediately with the remarkable simplicity of the place and with its harmony of proportion. The galleries, medium sized and friendly, are arranged in such a simple sequence that you can wander from one to another without retracing steps or wasting time on things that don't interest you . . ."



First section of the present Museum edifice, constructed 1910-1912.

George Stevens had great sympathy for people, especially those who made so much of the limited means with which they were endowed. He always had time for them, to listen to their hopes, ambitions, ideals, sorrows and troubles.

He was in his office every day of the week. On Saturdays he had innumerable young callers — the boy of ten who said, having been told that the design class was already filled to capacity, "I've got to get in, can't afford to waste another year of my life." Others came to consult him about stamps, coins or arrow-heads, small animals, the stars. On Sundays came all manner of people — more children, friends, trustees, artists, musicians, "the public." Anyone who walked into the Museum was welcome, and in nearly all he found a common intellectual meeting ground.

These hours spent so freely were helpful to many a would-be artist (for example, Norman Bel Geddes, whom he turned from his desire to paint Indians to more rewarding fields), as well as to many a troubled and disturbed individual whose problems had no connection with art, music, literature, or the Museum.

He could always give guidance to the mature artist, nearly always find some promise in the work of the amateur. He had a genial frankness which would permit him to say, "Do you want me to pay you pretty compliments or tell the truth?" Invariably, invited to do the latter, he would give a lesson in drawing, design and color.

He seemed to have a particular magnetism that drew to him the disturbed, the simple and the troubled, as well as the most able and intellectual. He listened to their tales, sometimes of real trials, sometimes quite imaginary, and gave such inspiration and comfort as he could.

He was equally urbane in receiving King Albert and presenting the dignitaries of Toledo to him, conversing with John Burroughs on his works and those of other naturalists, discussing the future of the automobile with Charles Kettering, presiding over the annual meetings of the Association of Art Museum Directors (and smoothing ruffled feelings and encouraging the dispirited), consoling a bereft employee, counselling a friend or a stranger in trouble.

The problems arising from the massing of population in urban centers, the detachment from the country, the uncontrolled proliferation of industrial plants, the multiplication of conveyances, the disintegration of neighborhood patterns, all disturbed him. He spoke constantly against man's neglect of his mind and of the accumulated cultural resources of the ages:

"A great manufacturing center is a prison house unless it provides something for the leisure hours."

"The busiest city on earth is fast asleep unless it is doing something towards the higher education of its people."

"No city is great unless it rests the eye, feeds the intellect, and leads its people out of the bondage of the commonplace."

"Work should be a means to leisure in which to enjoy the sublime creations of science, literature, music and art."

He campaigned, frequently unsuccessfully, for civic improvements. He, together with Mr. Libbey, served on the City Plan Commission which in 1924, gave Toledo one of the early Master Plans of American cities.

He saw art as the panacea for the great unrest, so prevalent just after the first World War; he defined art as "that science whose laws applied to all things made by man, make them most pleasing to the senses." He wrote: "The policy of the present day museum is to bring art into the lives of all the people, for the reason that in it and in the principles that it involves are found the ingredients lacking in our present day civilization and in the prevailing system of education."

And again: "It is the function of the modern museum of art not only to call the attention of the human race to these elemental truths which have smoldered in our treasure galleries or in the ruins of earlier civilizations, but also to take the lead in the educational revolution which is to restore and redevelop this important and vital heritage of man."

Perhaps his three greatest assets were his thirst for knowledge, his power of persuasion and a rare and memorable personality. They were invaluable in making an art museum a reality in a community whose mind was largely engrossed in its physical environment—its industries, its railroads, its commerce, its streets and roads, and its real estate developments—to the very large exclusion of the things of the mind and spirit.

Design class in the galleries, 1923



George Stevens had never been to college. He attended the Utica Academy, where his interests were largely centered upon the sciences, and particularly astronomy. He had studied painting with one of the best teachers of his time. He had an alert and perceptive mind. He could glance at a page and quote with reasonable accuracy its content. He could leaf through a book and select the passages worthy of more careful reading. But above all, he had the faculty of persistence. He would not permit a needed bit of information to elude him, no matter how difficult it was to track down.

In the long years when the Museum had no funds for purchases, when every cent spent for works of art, as well as for operations, had to be begged and cajoled in amounts ranging from a dollar to a limit rarely reaching one hundred, Mr. Stevens found that occasional beautiful, rare and early books, as well as etchings and lithographs, could be secured for reasonable sums. He began to assemble works in those fields. He was able to build a choice collection of prints, including, perhaps next to the Art Institute of Chicago, the most distinguished group of Meryon's drawings and etchings now existing.

The field of books and manuscripts was more difficult. Reference works were few. For incunabula, Hain's Repertorium, Copinger's Supplement and Proctor's Index, themselves rare volumes and hard to come by, expensive, and the first two in Latin, were basic. These and the other essential works on the printed book, its binding, and its illustration, and on medieval manuscripts, he secured. By study of them and visits to the great libraries and other museums, he acquired the knowledge which enabled him to bring together an assemblage which, though small, tells the story of man's record of his thoughts and deeds from the invention of the hieroglyph and the alphabet to the fine books and their illustrations and bindings at the beginning of the 20th century.

This he installed with interesting and informative labels to form a gallery outstanding for its quality and educational value, a model for enlightening installations in other areas of artistic achievement. He applied the same principles to the labeling of the Museum's interesting though hopelessly inadequate Egyptian collection, in which he had the benefit of the scholarly assistance of Caroline Ransome Williams.

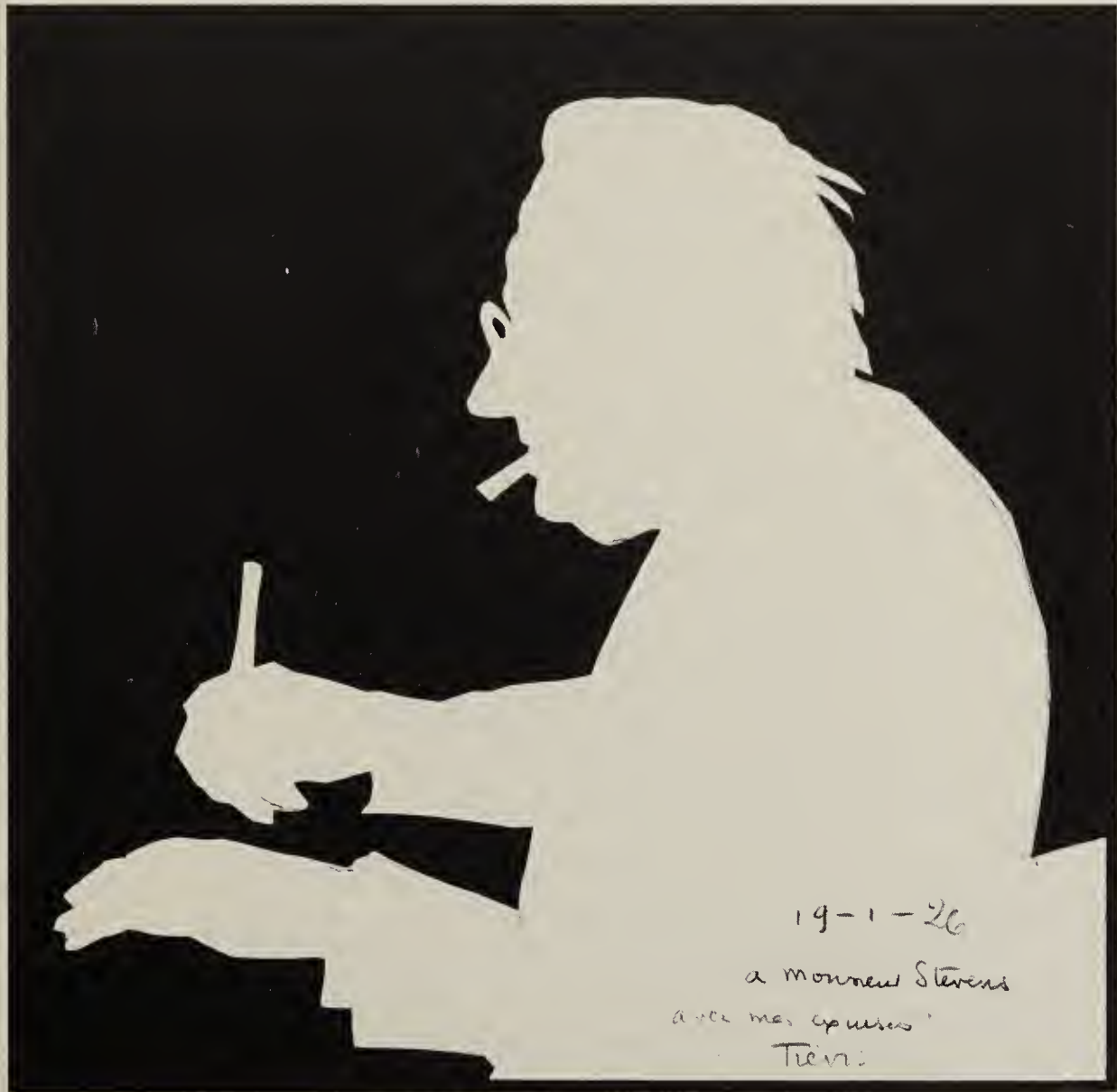
The connoisseurship in his thought for the development of other areas of the Museum was equally sound, but the execution of his plans, even in small part, was restricted throughout his life by the lack of funds. What he could have done with his rare judgment and his knowledge in those days

when art — even that of the Old Masters — was readily available for purchase, if there had been just a little money to invest in it, and what handsome dividends it would have been paying all these years.

Lord Birkett, who was at the bar or on the bench for forty years, writing of the art of advocacy in its wider sense as “the art of attractive and persuasive speech on all occasions that call for its exercise,” speaks of the elements essential to its practitioner as “a complete mastery of facts . . . a quick mind and an understanding heart . . . an insight into human nature, a natural and unforced sympathy with all sorts and conditions of men, and a command of language—the ability to use proper words in proper places.”

He also quoted Lord Roseberry: “It is not merely the thing that is said but the man who says it that counts, the character which breathes through the sentences.”

A silhouette of George W. Stevens by the Duc de Trevisé, 1926



George Stevens had all the qualities enumerated by Lord Birkett and the character and personality to fortify them. In all his speaking and writing, he was "the man that counts." He was not a great orator, but he was an eloquent speaker. He was forceful and impressive, never at a loss for the appropriate word or phrase or the apt illustration, the relieving touch of humor. He was in constant demand to preside at all manner of meetings and dinners. His oft-quoted remark, "I am always happy to speak to a group of bankers, because they take a great deal of interest in the community — at 8%, " was the highlight of one convention.

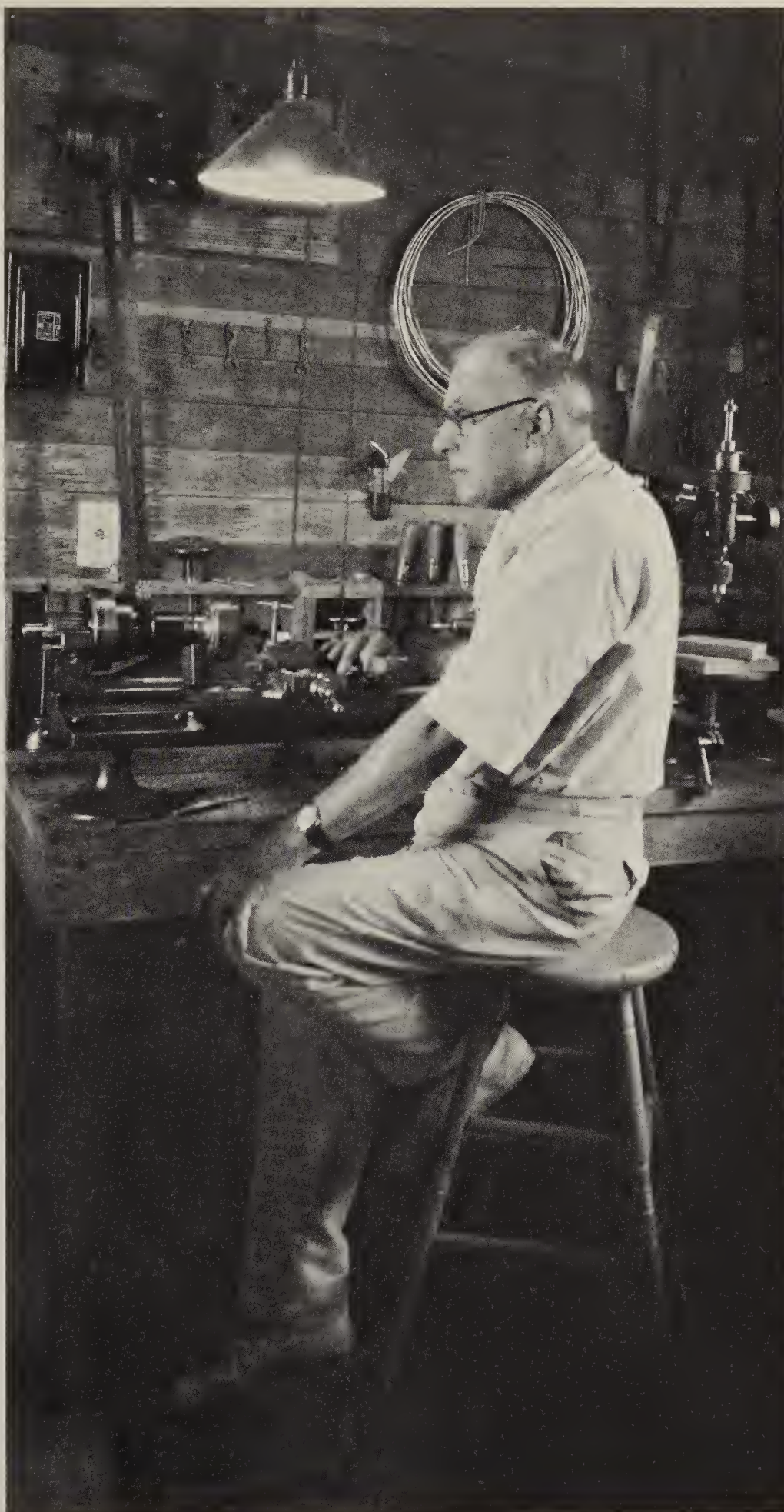
He had the ability to grasp the unexpected opportunity. While speaking of teaching of the fundamental principles of art, he noticed famed etcher Joseph Pennell shaking his head in vigorous dissent, and interjected, "Of course, we can't make a Pennell or a Whistler, but we can produce competent draftsmen, good designers, and create better citizens because they know something of the principles of art, though they may never become etchers or painters."

His presence was commanding on the platform or at his desk. His early photographs show the actor in him; his later ones the man who had charted a course and steered an institution along it successfully for nearly a quarter of a century. Arthritis had solidified his spine, so that his movements were deliberate, and had slightly stooped his shoulders, surmounted by a large face emphasized by the receding hair line. His appearance on the platform commanded instant attention. He had trained his rich and resonant voice until it had the quality and flexibility of a Stradivarius. He made posture and gesture as effective as the turn of a phrase — a fitting, but frequently unexpected one he could always find. But, above all, he had that "unforced sympathy with all sorts and conditions of men" and it was apparent not only in his speaking and writing, but in all his personal contacts and in all his thinking, planning, and accomplishments for the Museum.

He sought no accolades for himself but welcomed kind words or enthusiastic praise for the Museum. Perhaps this was enough, for the Museum was George Stevens in the minds of all who knew either it or him. He gave credit, frequently more than was their due, to all his associates and assistants, and to those who in any way prompted the realization of his ideal.

A year or so before his death he wrote a modest one-page obituary. It was terse and wholly factual, recording his birth, the positions which he had held, his publications, his membership in various local, national and international associa-

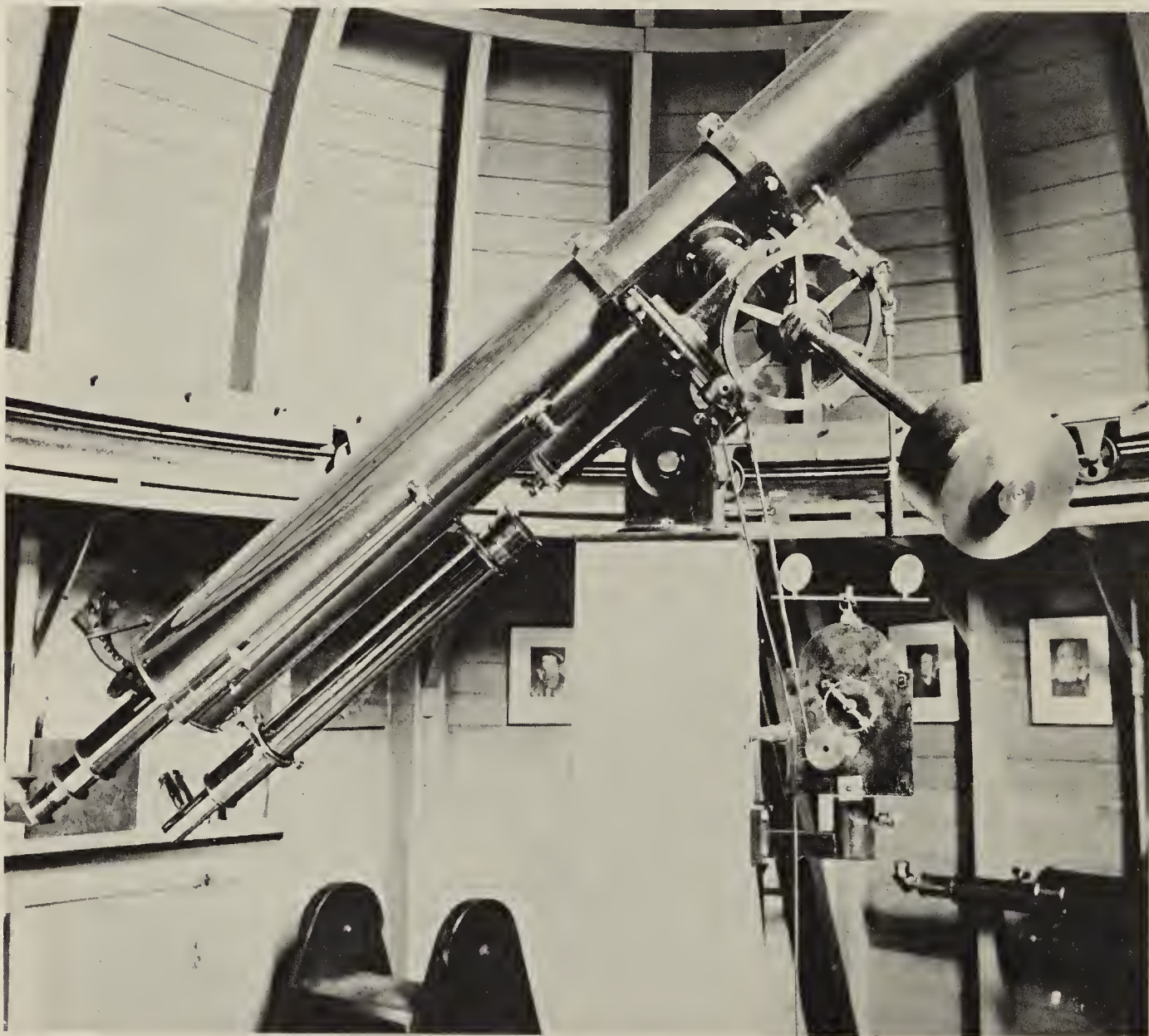
George W. Stevens in his shop, 1926



tions. Of all that he had done for the Museum, it said only "In 1903 became Director of Toledo Museum of Art, then in its infancy and located in the old Brown residence at the corner of Madison and 13th Streets." However, in its last line, he did throw aside his characteristic modesty to a degree to say, "Was interested in astronomy and maintained a perfectly equipped observatory."

In that observatory, and in the shop also attached to his house where he constructed micrometers and other attachments for the telescope, he spent many hours. When troubled by any great problem of the Museum — and there were many — he would retire to the observatory with its beautiful telescope with a six-inch refracting lens by Alvan Clark, or to his shop, and, in study of the heavens and the building of aids thereto, find the solution and plan its accomplishment.

The Observatory, Director's House (now destroyed) on Museum grounds



For twenty-three years he had guided and developed the Museum. During all that time never, save for brief interludes, was he free from financial worries, both institutional and personal.

When he gave up a lucrative occupation to take over the Directorship in 1903, the Museum's assets were less than a thousand dollars, its income for the previous year \$3,246; and his own salary was set at \$1,200, and that frequently foregone to pay for the coal, the light, and the janitor. Most of his time had to be spent in raising money, cajoling people to become members, members to pay their dues. In 1907 and 1908, raising the money to match Mr. Libbey's pledge to pay half the cost of the new building which he so desired — and Toledo so desperately needed — was a challenge, met only by his whole energy and his great persuasive powers.

That accomplished, there came the campaign for new members to support the new facilities; then the crippling illness and, scarcely relieved of the worst of it, the task of raising in individual subscriptions \$200,000 to match the \$400,000 Mr. Libbey had agreed to give for an endowment. With this achieved in 1916 (and his own salary then \$2,300), the inflation brought on by World War 1 called for fresh efforts. When the first building addition was started, the spectre of raising more money to support enlarged size and increased activities darkened the joys of accomplishment.

Then, just before the scheduled dedication of the addition, came Mr. Libbey's unexpected death on November 12, 1925 and his generous bequest.

Now at last it would be possible for Mr. Stevens, untroubled by money matters, to devote his full attention to the fundamentals, the formation of collections and their use for the art education of the people.

Elation at this prospect was dimmed by a sense of great personal loss. He gave the memorial address, finished the arrangements for the dedication of the building now "completed for the benefit of all those who seek self improvement" as had been planned with Mr. Libbey, and gave the dedicatory address. He produced a memorial issue of the Museum News.

At the Annual Meeting soon thereafter, he said, "For over twenty years your Director has had to devote most of his time and energy to the creating of the plant and provision for its maintenance, to the end that much else of great import has suffered by forced neglect, coupled with inadequate means. If, therefore, your Director is to give the institution such further service as the swiftly passing years will permit, a service which has long been his ambition and for which he

feels himself by experience and especially by inclination equipped to render, it is timely now to give him such support as is possible and within your power to accord."

He then reviewed the accomplishments in collection building achieved chiefly through the gifts of Mr. and Mrs. Libbey and Arthur J. Secor, emphasizing the high quality which had set a standard for the future, pointed out the weak areas, the fields which had been touched but lightly, and the necessity of proceeding while there was still time.

Then he began to plan for the future, the perfection of the installation of the galleries, the development of the collections, the enlargement of the staff, the expansion and improvement of the educational program, and the planning of the two further additions to the building which had been provided by Mr. Libbey's will. The means to make his vision a reality were at hand. But in October, 1926 he suffered a slight stroke, followed by a massive one. He was not to enter in, but he had seen the glories of the Promised Land.

Blake-More Godwin



THE TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART

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